

**Amendments to the Claims:**

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

1. (Currently Amended) A visual inspection apparatus, comprising:

imaging means for capturing images of three consecutive areas arranged in a line on an object;

image comparison means for ~~dividing the areas into at least one group, each group including consecutive three of the areas;~~ for designating one of the areas as a subject area and other two of the areas as comparison areas for the subject area, the comparison areas being ~~in the same group with the subject area and~~ within a predetermined distance from the subject ~~area;~~area, and for comparing the image of the subject area with the images of each of the comparison areas; and

defect detection means for detecting a defect in the object in accordance with the comparison between ~~the images~~each of the areas by the image comparison means,

wherein the image comparison means is configured to number the areas ~~in each group~~ along the line and to select the comparison areas,

when the subject area is one of the ends of the odd-numbered areas,~~areas in the group~~, the comparison areas are one odd-numbered area and one even-numbered area closest to the subject area, and

when the subject area is one even-numbered area and is not one of ends,~~ends in the group~~, the comparison areas are two odd-numbered areas closest to the subject area.

2. (Original) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein the areas are arranged in a row on the object.

3. (Original) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein the imaging means relatively scans the object along the line to sequentially capture the images of the areas.

4. (Original) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein the imaging means relatively scans the object along the line by one of a CCD line sensor and a TDI sensor to sequentially capture the images of the areas.

5. (Currently Amended) A visual inspection method, comprising the steps of:  
capturing images of three consecutive areas arranged in a line on an object;  
~~dividing the areas into at least one group, each group including consecutive~~  
~~three of the areas;~~

designating one of the three areas as a subject area and other two of the three areas as comparison areas for the subject area, the comparison areas being ~~in the same group~~  
~~with the subject area and~~ within a predetermined distance from the subject area; and

comparing the image of the subject area with the images of each of the comparison areas to determine whether the subject area is defective,

wherein the designating step includes numbering the areas ~~in each group along~~  
the line and selecting the comparison areas,

when the subject area is one of the ends of the odd-numbered areas, ~~areas in the~~  
~~group~~, the comparison areas are one odd-numbered area and one even-numbered area closest to the subject area, and

when the subject area is one even-numbered area and is not one of ~~ends~~ sends,  
~~in the group~~, the comparison areas are two odd-numbered areas closest to the subject area.

6. (Original) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 5, wherein the areas are arranged in a row on the object.

7. (Original) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 5, wherein the capturing step comprises the step of relatively scanning the object along the line to sequentially capture the images of the areas.

8. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 7, wherein the step of relatively scanning comprises scanning by one of a CCD line sensor and a TDI sensor.

9. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein when the imaging means captures at least two of the three areas, the image comparison means comparing the images between a first area and a second area.

10. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 9, the apparatus further comprising:

an image storage means that stores the images of the areas read from the image comparison means,

wherein when the first area has been captured and stored in the image storage means, and the second area is being captured, the image comparison means compares the images between the first area and the second area.

11. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 9, wherein the image comparison means compares the images of the first area and the second area on a frame-by-frame basis.

12. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection apparatus as defined in claim 9, wherein the defect detection means detects a defect if the difference between the images of the first area and the images of the second area exceed a predetermined threshold.

13. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 5, wherein when at least two of the three areas are captured, the comparing step comprises comparing the images between a first area and a second area.

14. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 13, the method further comprising:

storing the images of the areas read from the image comparison means,

wherein when the first area has been captured and stored in the image storage means, and the second area is being captured, the comparing step comprises comparing the images between the first area and the second area.

15. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 13, the image comparison means comparing the images of the first area and the second area on a frame-by-frame basis.

16. (Previously Presented) The visual inspection method as defined in claim 13, further comprising:

detecting a defect if the difference between the images of the first area and the images of the second area exceed a predetermined threshold.